

VZCZCXRO4821
RR RUEHDBU
DE RUEHNT #0291/01 0750832
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
R 160833Z MAR 09
FM AMEMBASSY TASHKENT
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 0609
INFO RHMFIUU/DEPT OF JUSTICE WASHINGTON DC
RUEABND/DEA HQS WASHINGTON DC
RUEHAH/AMEMBASSY ASHGABAT 0069
RUEHDBU/AMEMBASSY DUSHANBE 0021
RUEHEK/AMEMBASSY BISHKEK 0081
RUEHMO/AMEMBASSY MOSCOW 0038
RUEHNT/AMEMBASSY TASHKENT
RUEHTA/AMEMBASSY ASTANA 0071

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 05 TASHKENT 000291

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E.O. 12958: N/A
TAGS: [SNAR](#) [ASEC](#) [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [KCOR](#) [KCRM](#) [UZ](#)
SUBJECT: UZBEKISTAN: INL SPONSORS FORENSIC DELEGATION VISIT TO USA

REF: TASHKENT 017; 08 TASHKENT 1198; 08 TASHKENT 922; 08 TASHKENT 779

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1. (U) SUMMARY: The Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs (INL), with the support of the Department of Justice Criminal Investigative Training Assistance Program (ICITAP), arranged as a part of a successful ongoing project the participation of Uzbek forensic experts in the 61st Annual Meeting of the American Academy of Forensic Sciences (AAFS) in Denver, Colorado in February 2009. The Uzbek forensic experts also visited four different forensic laboratories: the Virginia Department of Forensic Science, the Virginia Office of the Chief Medical Examiner, the Denver Police Department Crime Laboratory, and the Harris County (Houston) Medical Examiners Office. The Uzbek delegation observed forensic laboratories accredited under the International Organization for Standardization (ISO) standards and their related quality assurance programs. We expect this visit will significantly aid the Uzbekistan Main Forensic Laboratory under the Ministry of Health (MOH) and Forensic Center under the Ministry of Justice (MOJ) in further enhancing the professional development of Uzbek laboratory staff and attaining international accreditation. Laboratory accreditation undoubtedly enhances the validity of evidence analysis in criminal investigation and furthers the cause of judicial reform in the country through periodic independent audits. End summary.

Forensic-focused Visit to USA

2. (U) As part of the current laboratory improvement project, Embassy Tashkent and ICITAP arranged participation of Uzbek forensic experts in the 61st annual meeting of the American Academy of Forensic Sciences (AAFS) in Denver, Colorado in February 2009. The Government of Uzbekistan appointed three officials for this trip: Mr. Javlonbek Rahimjanov, Chief of the newly established Quality Assurance Section of the Main Forensic Lab under the MOH; the MOJ Laboratory Director, Mr. Sattar Atakhodjaev, who oversees the only forensic DNA laboratory in Uzbekistan; and Ms. Vasilya Alimova, the Chief of the MOH Bureau responsible for identifying funding for the Main Forensic Bureau. (Note: the Quality

Assurance Section was created after the Chief of this lab, Dr. Giyasov, visited the Harris County Medical Examiners Office in July 2008 and was first introduced to the requirements of ISO accreditation (Reftels). An ICITAP team also visited the MOJ DNA laboratory in November 2008, at which time Mr. Atakhodjaev expressed his desire for the MOJ laboratory to be accredited under ISO. End note.)

Lessons Learned in Richmond

13. (U) Prior to the AAFS meeting, ICITAP brought the Uzbek officials to forensic laboratories in Richmond, VA. It was the first time the Uzbek officials saw such a modern forensic laboratory. The Deputy Chief of the lab personally conducted a familiarization tour around the facility and answered all questions. The Uzbek delegation commented to accompanying INL LES what they specifically liked in the Virginia labs:

- a. That the laboratories operate independently from any law enforcement agency;
- b. Effective lab management system;
- c. Updated and efficient Standard Operating Procedures (Note: As a matter of fact all former Soviet forensic laboratories do have SOPs but they are generally outdated

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and not always adhered to. End note.)

- d. Capacity to access, search, input and compare data in the national forensic databases;
- e. Strict chain of custody in the evidence control system.

Networking with Neighbors in Denver

14. (U) Departing Virginia, the Uzbekistan delegation traveled to Denver and participated in a five-day professional forum of the American Academy of Forensic Sciences. It is significant to note that during the event Uzbek officials met not only with colleagues from the United States, but also from Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan. We expect that the Central Asian officials who met in person will establish regional forensic connections and learn from each other.

15. (U) During the AAFS meeting the Uzbek delegation mainly focused attention on two topics: standards for attaining international accreditation (ISO) and establishment of a laboratory Quality Assurance program (QA). The vital importance of these topics was emphasized by INL/ICITAP experts during workshops and seminars since the concepts and requirements are new for the Uzbek laboratories.

16. (U) The Uzbek delegation mentioned that, in addition to lectures, the tour of the Denver Police Department Crime Laboratory and vendor exhibition of new forensic equipment were particularly useful in broadening their horizons.

Texas Lab Shows What ISO Accreditation Entails

17. (U) At the conclusion of the conference, the delegation flew to Houston and visited the Harris County Medical Examiners Office. The Forensic Laboratory Director, Dr. Ashraf Mozayani, personally provided an overview of the laboratory and the quality assurance programs (Note: Dr. Mozayani is herself a frequent

visitor to Uzbekistan under the auspices of this project, and this visit helped strengthen the relationship she has built with Uzbek counterparts. End note.) During a busy schedule, the Uzbek experts visited many different departments, sections, and laboratories, covering the topics of DNA and Serology, Biology, Toxicology, Anthropology, Morgue, Controlled Substances, Trace Evidence and Investigation. They also participated in briefs about management, budgeting, and a lecture on how to properly justify equipment, labor, and other resource requests to government officials. A detailed description was given about Quality Assurance and Quality Control (QA/QC) programs, including proficiency tests, financial support and budget creation, general laboratory management, safety measures, and necessary reporting systems. The Uzbek experts noted that their Harris County visit gave them a superb practical view of the material covered during the AAFS lectures.

Sharing the Knowledge

18. (U) Embassy Tashkent was invited to attend a summary presentation in the Uzbek Forensic Bureau on March 9 that highlighted the results of this trip for the benefit of all entire laboratory personnel. This has become an established tradition now that multiple trips have been sponsored for Uzbek scientists at conferences abroad, and the sense of responsibility in sharing lessons learned is taking root.

Recommendations for Government Decision-Makers

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9.(U) The Uzbek participants reported that they will recommend the following action steps to the Government of Uzbekistan:

- a. Review and update existing Forensic SOPs;
- b. Introduce ISO standards;
- c. Fully adopt QA/QC procedures in Uzbekistan forensics programs;
- d. Conduct more trainings with international participants;
- e. Begin laboratory employee proficiency testing;
- f. Improve the system of evidence handling with a goal of preventing cross contamination;
- g. Participate in an international long-term laboratory exchange program between similar forensic departments. This will provide a practical view of routine forensic processes and would be seen as a major benefit for the Uzbek experts. (Note: However, while the delegation visited the U.S. we received a diplomatic note denying just such a proposed internship for an Uzbek scientist in Texas, demonstrating that such plans are still considered sensitive to the Uzbek government. End note.)
- h. Invite U.S. experts from a wider spectrum, including specialists in forensic serology, biology, toxicology, anthropology, pathology, controlled substance, trace evidence, and DNA;
- i. Share knowledge and experience with regional experts;
- j. Establish joint databases, images, and SOPs;
- k. Create a forensic communication network around the country to expedite the process of solving complicated

cases, which will allow experts to exchange information (Note: Embassy Tashkent through INL is currently working on establishing a pilot phase forensic network. End note.)

l. Fill a gaping need by appointing a Director of Operations position in larger laboratories. Such a professional would manage administrative, financial, business and operations activities, allowing the scientific experts to focus on what they do best.

m. Work to improve the importance and visibility of forensic laboratories within the former Soviet Union;

n. Explore the possible addition of disciplines that cover forensic nursing and forensic investigations in relation to sexual assaults.

LAB IMPROVEMENT PROJECT -- RESULTS ACHIEVED

110. (U) The overarching project goal is to educate Uzbekistan on how to build a modern forensic laboratory and how to receive ISO accreditation, thereby enhancing the validity of evidence analysis in criminal cases and improving the judicial system. Post already has compiled success stories from the lab as a result of this project work, including:

a. The position of Forensic Quality Manager was created in the Main Forensic Laboratory.

b. Ministry officials and laboratory experts realized the importance of international standards and are beginning to strive toward ISO accreditation.

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c. Forensic Bureau experts started their work to update Forensic Standard Operating Procedures with a goal to comply with international standards. (Note: Even though it is a lengthy process, it is a major milestone on the path to international recognition. End note.)

d. As a result of the Agilent Gas Chromatograph Mass Spectrometer system which was donated, the Uzbek experts can now provide qualitative and quantitative toxicology analysis for complex cases. Determining the amount of a substance in the body is a very important aspect in defining the role of toxic substances, including drugs and psychotropic substances, in order to establish cause of death. For example, previously Uzbek experts could only say if a certain substance was in the blood of dead person, whereas now they can determine if that substance was in a sufficient amount to cause of death. Previously the toxicological department of the lab provided only identification of substances and not quantity. These advances have already made law enforcement investigations more sophisticated.

e. The Main Forensic Lab is now capable of providing training to lab experts from all over Uzbekistan as well as other countries on new toxicology methods and the use of Agilent Gas Chromatograph Mass Spectrometer system.

f. The donated UV light source and training provided an opportunity for lab personnel to identify previously hidden body fluid stains in criminal cases involving sexual assaults and tremendously reduced the time required for semen, saliva, and urine stain searches.

g. The recently introduced Phenolphthalein test and associated donated chemicals allow analysts to conduct a safe preliminary test for the detection of blood. This test is replacing the Benzidine test which is a known cancer causing agent and is a health risk to laboratory employees.

h. The newly introduced Modified Takayama test and donated chemicals allows for the positive identification of blood, thereby providing increased capability for the laboratory.

i. The newly introduced staining method, known in the U.S. as the Christmas Tree Stain, allows for better staining of spermatozooids and results in increased detection of evidence in sexual assaults.

j. The Anthropology section uses the donated stereomicroscopes equipped with a digital camera to better document their findings in case notes. The photographs also allow for visual support of findings in laboratory reports.

k. Laboratory employees have benefited from exposure to international conferences and workshops, at which they have built networks and learned about peer review of academic work. This integration with an international professional community has increased motivation to learn English, and donated workstations equipped with language-learning software have helped improve English skills among the professionals.

Comment:

11. (U) The Main Forensic Laboratory of the Ministry of Health is an important resource supporting criminal investigations in Uzbekistan and U.S. assistance has already achieved concrete improvements. The project has also encouraged the Government of Uzbekistan to pay more attention to the role of such institutions, and it responded to our investment by constructing a new facility for the main forensic laboratory. More work

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remains on the long road to attaining ISO accreditation, and we encourage an additional funding stream to continue this productive assistance effort. While much attention thus far has been devoted to the Ministry of Health laboratory, there is also ample opportunity to do project work with the Ministry of Justice, which will enhance our impact on rule of law programming.

NORLAND